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BELARUSIAN

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DIALOGUE WITHOUT DIALOGUE

For several months the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has been urging the Belarusian authorities to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the opposition, under OSCE auspices. Instead, Lukashenka prefers his own brand of dialogue – without the OSCE.

Accordingly,

On 1 March an 'initiative group for holding a social and political dialogue' under the auspices of the presidential administration had its first meeting in Minsk. Some 40 associations and political parties were represented, and decided that key issues for their future deliberations will be parliamentary elections and electoral legislation. Belarusian opposition parties, however, did not participate, considering that any dialogue under Lukashenka's auspices will be based on "ultimatum-like conditions and *diktat*'.

The OSCE, not surprisingly, also doubts the value of Lukashenka's 'dialogue. It continues to press for a 'real' dialogue in Belarus, in order, in the words of OSCE Chairwoman Benita Ferrero-Walker, to 'overcome the constitutional controversy and the still existing discrepancies between the present version of the [Belarusian] Electoral Code and OSCE standards. The US government is also urging a 'genuine' dialogue, with OSCE participation. Preconditions for such a dialogue, according to US State Secretary James Rubin, must include an end to the harassment of opposition members and the independent media. Otherwise, he warned, the result will be 'sham dialogue, illegitimate parliamentary elections', the further polarization of Belarusian society, and the deepening of its 'isolation from democratic Europe'.

The OSCE, however, does not intend to abandon he idea of a meaningful dialogue. On 2 March, its representatives, together with delegates from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and the European Parliament, had talks in Minsk with representatives of opposition parties and non-governmental organizations. The Belarusian democrats – just like the participants in the official 'dialogue' the previous day- urged the importance of talks on electoral legislation. This, and the powers of the future parliament, should, they urged, be at the focus of any political talks with the authorities.

The following day the delegates met Lukashenka. He too, expressed himself willing to discuss amendments to the electoral code – but not the powers of parliament. Lukashenka, they reported, believes that the balance in Belarus between the powers of the legislature (parliament) and the executive (himself and his team) are 'perfectly' balanced.

Nevertheless, Lukashenka still continues to advocate dialogue – on his own terms. He has appointed a new presidential aide (Siarhiey Posakhau) whose job will be to prepare for the dialogue by 'maintaining ties with the public and organizing work with parties, trade unions, and all public associations'. Likewise, on 6 March, Lukashenka instructed Uladzimir Rusakevich, the deputy head of the presidential administration staff, to consult with the leaders of political parties and public associations about their taking part in a future dialogue of all socio-political forces of Belarus'. Rusakevich issued an invitation to the leaders of such organizations to apply to take part in this dialogue. Whether or not by chance, he set the deadline for applications as 15 March – the day scheduled for the opposition's 'Freedom March-2' (see page 2).

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"United we stand..."

The Trade Unions of Lower Saxony (Germany) have appealed to the directors of the Minsk and Mahileu automobile plants, urging them to cease harassing the Belarusian independent Trade Union (ITU).

We have received confirmation that the plant which you run is gravely violating the rights of the Independent Trade Union of Belarus, [rights] which are guaranteed both by the Constitution and by the conventions of the International Labour Organization which the Republic of Belarus has ratified. Attempts are being made to ban the branches and shop-floor groups of the Independent Trade Union of Belarus; there have been reports of pressure exerted upon unionists and violations of their civil rights', - the German Unions wrote.

They warned that if such reports continued, they would be obliged to appeal to the European Union to impose economic sanctions on Belarus.

According to a Presidential decree, all local branches and chapters of trade unions must be registered with the local authorities. The latter, however, although keen enough to register the 'official' trade unions are making little effort to get the ITU registered - an attitude which reportedly has the support of the managements of industrial plants (which are still state-owned). According to the Belarusian human rights group 'Charter 97', by the middle of March, out of the 63 ITU groups which had applied for registration, only 13 had been issued with the necessary certificates.

'FREEDOM MARCH-2' – an opposition event protesting against the policies of President Alaksandr Lukashenka, and demanding political freedom and the 'return' of Belarus to Europe, took place in Minsk on 15 March. The police had tried to undermine publicity for this event, confiscating leaflets and tearing down posters. (When challenged, they explained that they were acting on orders – but refused to say from whom!). Nevertheless, an estimated 20,000 people took part in the march through Minsk, which was followed by a rally and rock concert. The rally adopted a resolution calling for negotiations between the Belarusian authorities and the opposition, to try to resolve the country's economic problems.

'FREEDOM MARCH' brings ban on demos

Although the event had taken place without clashes, the city council said the ban was necessary, since the march had disrupted traffic and produced many complaints from residents. The organizers, they said, had failed to keep the pledges of good order they had made.

Opposition activists stated, in spite of the ban, they would go ahead with the march planned for 25 March to mark the 82nd anniversary of the proclamation of Belarusian independence in 1918. They denied that there had been any breach of order or serious inconvenience to the public. According to Vintsuk Vyachorka, leader of the opposition Belarusian Popular Front, the real author of the ban is the presidential administration, since it could not counter the 'triumph of the Freedom March-2 with any other arguments'. The administration is now 'living in fear and hysteria', Vyachorka says.

'Freedom March-2' had the support of the Swedish Social Democratic Party, which held rallies of support in Stockholm and Kiruna and launched a Web site to raise public awareness of the opposition movement in Belarus. Rallies and pickets of support were also held outside a number of Belarusian embassies, including those in Brussels, Warsaw and Kyiv. At the latter, activists from the youth section of Ukraine's pro-democracy *Rukh* movement warned against the Ukrainian authorities' announced intention to hold a constitutional referendum. 'Don't let Ukraine repeat the Belarusian scenario!' they said.

Meanwhile, President Lukashenka, citing 'three secret reports' on 'Freedom March-2' has stated that the marchers were protesting not on political but on personal grounds. There were, he maintains, not more than 7500 of them, and these are mainly rich people and their families, who feel 'offended' by his 'unpopular' economic decisions, which have reduced their wealth.

THE MINSK CITY AUTHORITIES have come up with a piquant justification for their ban on the 25 March demonstration: namely, that 25 March on the Gregorian (Western) calendar, used by the Catholic Church, is the Feast of the Annunciation. The planned end-point of the march, Independence Square, happens also to be the location of one of the city's main Catholic churches - St Simon and Helena - popularly known from its colour as the 'red' church. A demonstration, said the authorities, would insult the feelings of Catholics, and could prevent them getting to Mass. As for the proposed starting point, Yakub Kolas Square. They pointed out that last year on May 30 last year (Orthodox Whit Sunday) , a crowd emerging from a pop concert tried to shelter from a sudden rain shower in the underpass at Niamiha station. There was a stampede, resulting in many deaths and injuries. The city could not bear another religious festival being marked with such grief!

As for the planned starting point of the march, Yakub Kolas Square, that is right by a metro station, and the march - planned for the evening rush-hour, might delay workers from getting home.

The city fathers seem to have forgotten that since 25 March is a Saturday this year, there would be no rush-hour traffic that day. Nor are the Belarusian authorities usually so solicitous towards Catholic sensibilities. Last year, elections to local councils were held on Catholic Easter day.

QUOTES ***from opposition leaders at the 'Freedom March-2 rally:***

'We are sick and tired of empty promises of the man who was elected president by mistake. Belarus needs changes and it will have a happy future.' - **Yury Khadyka.**

'We support the return of Belarus to Europe instead of dragging it into an empire [i.e. Russia] which is bogged down in war and corruption.' - **Vintsuk Vyachorka.**

US 'Helsinki Commission' considers Belarus

The US Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe', generally known as the 'Helsinki Commission' held a hearing on Belarus in Washington D.C. on 10 March.

According to the Chairman of the Commission, Christopher Smith, the Lukashenka regime continues to stifle fundamental freedoms and to violate human rights in Belarus, while refusing to engage in 'meaningful dialogue' with the opposition.

US Assistant Secretary of State Harold Hongju Koh said that the situation

COURT CASES

ANDREY KLIMAU, a leading member of the Belarusian opposition has been sentenced to six years imprisonment on charges of fraud and misappropriating funds. The opposition maintains that these charges were trumped-up. In 1996, when the (constitutionally elected) Belarusian parliament tried to impeach Lukashenka, Klimau, as an MP, had accused the president of violating the constitution, and urged that he be arrested. The trial and sentence, says the opposition, are Lukashenka's revenge. Support for Klimau has spread far beyond Belarus - more than 500 MPs from all over Europe and many international human rights organizations had urged the Belarusian authorities to drop the charges which, they said, were politically motivated. Several of these groups have now formally proclaimed Klimau a Prisoner of Conscience.

Ironically, many of the senior officials in Lukashenka's administration reside in apartments built by a construction company owned by Klimau.

SOME OF THE MOST virulent anti-Semitic material written in tsarist Russia has been decreed 'scholarly information' by a district court in Minsk. The material, including the notorious forgery, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, were reprinted in a book published by the 'Orthodox Initiative' private company. Jewish organizations brought a libel suit against the publishers; however, the court ruling that the book is a work of scholarship means that it cannot be made the subject of court litigation. Yakov Gutman, president of the New-York-based World Organization of Belarusian Jews, told the media that he found 'nothing surprising' in the verdict 'given the fact that the [Belarusian] president has publicly eulogized Hitler'. The court's decision is similar to a case a few years back in St Petersburg, where the defendant, prosecuted for publishing a similar collection, defended himself by saying that he had not published it to 'incite ethnic hatred' (an indictable offence in Russia), but simply 'as scholarly information'.

CONCERN OVER 'DISAPPEARED' POLITICIANS CONTINUES

Public concern continues over the fate of former Interior Minister Yury Zakharenka, former Deputy Premier Viktar Hanchar, and Hanchar's friend Anatol Krasutski, who disappeared under mysterious circumstances last year.

On 1 March, three opposition activists mounted an unauthorized picket outside the presidential administration building, demanding that the authorities clarify the three men's fate. The protesters were arrested by security police. Three journalists were also taken into custody, but were released an hour later.

ECONOMY

'Improvements and contradictions'

Mark Horton, the permanent representative of the International Monetary Fund for Belarus and Lithuania, told a news conference in Minsk that Belarus's economic policies still contain inherent 'contradictions'. H noted that there has been some improvement since last year. – notably some steps towards liberalizing the foreign exchange market. However, he said, he was disappointed with an edict from President Lukashenka at the end of February which requires that Belarusian exporters must sell 40% of their hard currency earnings to the government. The IMF is also unhappy, he said, about plans for government borrowings this year from the National Bank (which will mean that the latter has less chance of liberalizing the exchange rate) and about the large loans which the commercial banks have been instructed to make to collective and state farms. (See below: 'Disastrous Agriculture'). The IMF wants the National Bank to state clearly that it will not guarantee these loans in any form, Horton said.

Inflation 'three times over target'

Inflation in Belarus in January was 14.1%, according to Paviel Kalaur, the first deputy head of the Belarusian National Bank. This is three times higher than the Belarusian government's estimate of a monthly inflation rate of 4 – 5% during 2000. Earlier, Piotr Prakapovich, the head of the National Bank had told a news conference that the high inflation rate was not due to an increase in the money supply (which had not exceeded 4% in that month, but to rising oil prices, shortages of goods, and the unprofitability of some goods and services.

...and fuel prices still rising

Official petrol and diesel fuel prices rose by a further 11% on 12 %. The new prices range from 95-octane petrol now costs 366 new Belarusian roubles (BR) - about 40 cents US - per litre, to 76-octane petrol at 222 BR – 26 cents US - per litre. Diesel fuel is 209 BR –25 cents US - per litre.

To try to earn additional hard currency for oil imports, the government has begun selling oil products to the population for foreign currency. Including the tax, hard-currency prices range from 76-octane petrol at 30 cents US per litre to 95-

in Belarus has significantly deteriorated since the commission's previous hearing last year.

Ross Wilson, an adviser to U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, said the Lukashenka regime has lost its democratic legitimacy. It therefore 'lacks authority to commit Belarus' to the Belarus-Russia Union, he said.

The commission heard testimonies from leading Belarusian opposition politicians Stanislau Shushkevich, and Anatol Lyabedzka and Siamon Sharetski. The latter, in particular, expressed a fear that Russia intends to annex Belarus.

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octane petrol at 45 cents per litre, with diesel fuel at 25 cents per litre.

Ban on resales

The Belarusian government has drawn up a list of goods which Belarusian firms may not sell abroad if they purchase them for hard currency within Belarus. The ban on such sales was announced in a Presidential decree on 4 January. The list of goods it covers was, however, published more than a month later. Among the items banned for resale are food grains (rye, barley, wheat, energy sources (oil, natural gas, electricity), pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, tobacco and 'sea products'.

More enterprises make losses

Out of the 4, 490 enterprises operating in Belarus, 40% worked at a loss in January 2000. The corresponding figure for 1999 was 27.2%.

Meanwhile...

According to the outgoing Prime Minister Siarhiey Linh, the budget of the Union of Belarus and Russia has been set at 2.2 billion Russian roubles. Of these Belarus will have to raise 780 million and Russia 1,450 million. In other words, the Belarusian contribution will be about 57 % of the size of the Russian one. For comparison, the population of Belarus is 10.2 million; that of the Russian Federation is

According to Linh, 'budget-linked programmes' of the Union state still 'remain to be implemented'.

'DISASTROUS' AGRICULTURE

Belarusian agriculture is in a 'disastrous' state, according to Ivan Nikitchanka the chairman of the agricultural commission of the opposition's shadow government – the National Executive Committee (NEC). Nikitchanka, who is a 'Corresponding' (i.e. associate) Member of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, told a meeting of the NEC that the grain yield last was only 14.5 quintals per hectare (the same as for the poor harvest of 1996). The flax yield had fallen to the level of 1949 – when Belarus was still suffering from the devastation of World War II. The harvest of root crops was only half that of 1968. Livestock has fallen to only 70 % of what it was in 1995, and, for the first time in many years, the number of poultry decreased last year. As a result, only 2,170 million hens' eggs were produced in 1999, although the national demand is estimated at 2,800 million.

The statistics are grim but – according to Nikitchanka – contain a solution to the problem. For they show that the small amount of land in private use in Belarus is used three times more effectively than that owned by either collective or state farms.

The current Belarusian leadership clearly has no intention of trying to cure the crisis by privatizing the collective/state agricultural sector. Instead, the Belarusian Council of Ministers has ordered ministries and other government agencies to become, as it were, patrons of individual state or collective farms and to help them 'improve their financial and technical base, employed skilled personnel and organize the production process using progressive forms of labour organization and management'. Government agencies are expected to provide the farms with money out of their own operating funds and to hand over property under their control, In all, 25 ministries, 14 state committees, 11 state-owned enterprises, eight banks, two state production associations and one executive committee will 'assist' 80 collective and state farms.

In particular, seven banks have been 'requested' to provide loans of $19.7 million by the beginning of May for the import of grain, high-protein animal feed and feed additives. The borrowers – poultry-rearing plants, collective and state farms and feed mills, will be allowed to pledge their fixed assets and circulating capital as security for the loans, and government will give the banks guarantees of repayment.

MILITARY MATTERS

THE DEFENCE MINISTERS OF BELARUS AND UKRAINE have signed a bilateral cooperation agreement for 2000. After the signing ceremony in Kyiv, the Ukrainian minister Oleksandr Kuzmuk commented that the two countries face the same practical problems in the military sector: the need to modernize their armed forces, upgrade, replace or recycle obsolescent weapons and equipment and improve military training. Chumakou tried to allay Ukrainian fears about the Belarus-Russia Union, by telling the Ukrainian media that the Belarusian government does not intend to have any Russian troops stationed in Belarus 'during peace time'. He also observed that. Belarus cooperates with NATO under the 'Partnership for Peace' programme - but not on the scale 'it would like to'.

Nuclear weapons for Belarus?

The independent Russian newspaper Novye *Izvestiya* reported on 7 March that Russia and Belarus had reached an 'agreement in principle; on returning nuclear missiles to Belarus, possibly even in the present year. They could either be located in the former silos [supposedly destroyed with the financial assistance of the West], or 'more likely', deployed on mobile launchers or carried by strategic bombers. The paper cited a source ' close to Belarus's top leadership' as having provided this information. It speculated that Russian generals are urging the return of nuclear weapons to Belarus, and that this would 'secure' Lukashenka's political future

Although Belarus (under the leadership of Stanislau Shushkevich) acceded to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and insisted on the Soviet missiles left on its territory being withdrawn to Russia), Lukashenka has publicly stated that he considers these decisions were 'a mistake'. Nevertheless, he

FRIENDS...

PRESIDENT NURSULTAN NAZARBAYEV of Kazakstan has made his attitude to the Union of Belarus and Russia and Belarus' quite clear. It is, he stated, the 'choice of the [Kazak] nation not to join. His statement was, in effect, a reply to the 'Slavic communities of Kazakstan' – an organization representing the interests of the ethnic Russian minority (mainly incomers from the Soviet period) who had called for a referendum on the possibility of joining, and also to Serikbolsyn Adbildin, leader of the Kazak Communist Party, who had urged that Kazakstan should 'take its time' over deciding whether or not to join. The Kazak President's statement was followed by a warning from the Prosecutor-General's office that calls for Kazakstan to join the Union are 'an interference in state affairs by public organizations) and hence 'a gross violation of the constitution and laws of Kazakstan'.

THE ONLY COUNTRY which has shown any enthusiasm for joining the Union is Slobodan Milosevic's Yugoslavia. The speaker of the 'Council of the Republic' (Upper House of the 'parliament' installed by Lukashenka in December 1996) Paviel Sypuk made an official visit to Belgrade in mid-March, during the course of which he spoke enthusiastically about opportunities for 'cooperation' between Yugoslavia and the Union, the need to sign a Belarusian-Yugoslav free trade agreement, and Belarusian help to rebuild Yugoslavia after the NATO bombings.

SOME RUSSIANS, however, seem less than overwhelmed with the prospect. According to Gennadiy **Seleznev**, Speaker of the Russian State Duma, although the Union is 'open to all who wish to join it', no action can be taken about Yugoslav accession until after the parliamentary elections due in both Belarus and Yugoslavia. Writing in the Russian 'Parliamentary Gazette' (*Parlamentarskaya Gazeta*, 17 March, 2000), he said that a special parliamentary commission has been set up to consider all aspects of the Yugoslav case. Such commissions, it may be noted, in Russia as elsewhere, are frequently used as a means of deferring a decision on a question to which a definite answer might, at the moment, prove politically embarrassing. In the case of Yugoslavia, too long a delay might mean that in the meantime, that state has ceased to exist at all. The Montenegrins are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their status as junior partners in the two-republic Yugoslav Federation, and there is a growing movement – at all levels of political life – for Montenegro to be fully independent.

THE BELARUSIAN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY (Lukashenka's parliament) has signed a protocol of cooperation with the Lower House of the Vietnamese parliament. This covers 'exchange of information and lawmaking experience, mutual support in international parliamentary organizations, and the fostering of economic, cultural and scientific/technical cooperation between Belarus and Vietnam.

THE FIRST MEETING of a new Iraq-Belarus Joint Committee was held on 24 February. Agreements were signed, under which Belarus will export 150 trucks and 10,000 tyres to Iraq under the UN 'oil for food' programme. The Ira- [illegible]

> *'I think that Lukashenka as Russian President could be better than Lushkov, for example. Lukashenka could be better than Primakov. Lukashenka could be better than Zhyuganov. For a very simple reason: he is more modern. Despite everything, he is more modern... However, in my opinion, he of course cannot be compared with Russia's current acting president, Putin'.* -Russian financial tycoon Boris Berezovskiy, interviewed in New York by the Belarusian Service of Radio Liberty.

repudiated the *Novyye Izvestiya* report. 'The question [of nuclear missiles in Belarus] has been neither raised nor discussed', he stated on 10 March. In any case, he said, there is no need for such weapons in Belarus now that the union treaty with Russia has been signed. Russia's new military doctrine envisions the 'first strike' use of nuclear weapons in the case of aggression against its allies, including its 'strategic partner', Belarus, he said. 'Russia is our dependable ally and relations between Belarus and Russia will get even better'.

Pilots grounded for lack of fuel

The Belarusian air force training programme faces shutdown due to lack of fuel, air force chief Siarhiey Bulyhin reported to a board of the Defence Ministry on 17 March.

The board was reviewing the combat readiness of the Belarusian armed forces, and Bulygin's figures must have proved grim hearing.

[illegible] months of this year, he said, air force aircraft flew only 967 hours - less than ° of what had been planned for this period. The main reason was lack of fuel; the air force needs at least 7,000 tonnes of kerosene a day for routine training flights; however, for the first three months of the year it has been allotted only half the necessary amount. Parachute training for the personnel of the mobile forces and a brigade of Special Forces has had to be cancelled for lack of fuel. So have several tactical air-defence exercises.

If the Defence Ministry top brass cannot find a way to increase fuel supplies, the air force entire training programme will come to an end, Bulyhin warned.

OIL RESOURCES

Belarus's small deposits of fossil fuels have been estimated at 62,655 million tonnes of oil and 35.04 billion cubic metres of associated gas. Of these, 44.2% are described by the state-owned oil production monopoly 'Belarusnafta' as 'active'. Oil is currently being extracted from them, and they are expected to last for another 18 years. The remaining 'difficult' deposits (with water-content over 80% or with high viscosity) could last for 34 years, Belarusnafta reports.

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for steel reinforcements (for building purposes); also wood, storage batteries and plumbing fixtures. Discussions also covered the possibility of sending Iraqi specialists to Belarus for further training; also possible cooperation between academic institutions and in sport and the arts. Commenting on the meeting, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Hikmat-al-Awazzi said that this was further evidence that in spite of the 'extremes in slandering and distorting Iraq' promulgated by 'US imperialism' and 'reactionary Arabs', many of those who used to hold 'distorted views' have now 'corrected their stance'.

...AND NEIGHBOURS

IN HAJNOWKA COUNTY, in eastern Poland, where the population is largely ethnic-Belarusian, there have been demonstrations against new new plans to include the whole forest area in the locality within the Bialowieza National Park. This forest, which straddles the present Belarusian-Polish frontier, is the last remnant of the primaeval forest which once stretched across Europe. The inner part of the forest, on both sides of the frontier, is officially a protected nature reserve. However, until now, some utilization of forest resources is permitted on the outer fringes. Such use should, of course, be carefully controlled and forest-related industries should be environmentally friendly. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case, and foresters will still point out to the concerned visitor the scars from unrestricted clearance-felling in the 1920s, carried out under licence from the Polish government, by, regrettably, a British firm.

For years, environmentalists have warned that too much exploitation of the outer zone could mean damage to the inner, protected, zone. Now, possibly with an eye to EU accession, the Polish government has decided to extend the boundaries of the protected 'National Park' to include the entire Polish section of the forest. Local inhabitants, however, fear that this could mean the loss of their forest-dependent jobs, and when Environment Minister Antoni Tokarczuk visited the town of Bialowieza in mid-March, he was pelted with eggs.

The Polish authorities have promised 'social cushions' for those who lose their jobs as a result of the expansion of the National Park, but the local Belarusians say that these will be insufficient.

Another, related source of grievance is the recent decision of Polish Railways to close the Siedlice-Czeremcha-Hajnowka-Cisowka line on the grounds that it is unprofitable Already the Bialowieza-Hajnowka-Bielsk Podlaski-Bialystok line has been closed for the same reason. However, the Belarusians point out that the Polish Railways continues to operate other, equally unprofitable lines elsewhere.

Local Belarusian community leaders stress that the expected job losses, coupled with the railway closures, will lead to depopulation and changes in the ethnic structure of the area, contrary to European legal norms and the international conventions on national minorities.

An estimated 200,000 ethnic Belarusians live in eastern Poland, in the area which (since the 1998 reorganization of provincial boundaries) is now divided between Lublin and Podlasie Provinces. They fulfil the requirements under international law of a 'national minority' - separate linguistic and cultural identity, compact settlement in an area where they have a 'historic' presence, and hence, under the conventions on national minorities, have various rights pertaining to national culture, language and education - at least in theory.

MEDIA AND PUBLICATIONS

NEW DISCRIMINATORY MEASURES have been imposed on the struggling independent media. Postal rates for the mailing of independent newspapers were recently raised by 400 –600 %, while state-owned papers continue to receive postal discounts. (Independent papers are not carried by newspaper kiosks, and apart from few sellers operating at metro stations in the capital, Minsk – often in technical breach of the ever-changing public order regulations – postal subscriptions are the only means of obtaining them).

Accordingly, at the end of February, the editors-in-chief of the independent papers *Narodnaya Volya*, *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, *Belorusskaya Gazeta*, *Svobodniye Novosti*, *Belorusski Rynok* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* sent an open letter to the new Prime Minister Uladzimir Yarmoshyn demanding an end to the discriminatory measures employed against them. The letter stated, in particular, that the increased postal charges "undermine the economic basis of the non-state publications" and hence violate the freedom of the press.

ON 6 MARCH, an expert group on the media from the Consultative Council of Opposition Parties stated that the state-controlled media are still inaccessible for both opposition parties and "'the majority of citizens'. Last autumn, under pressure from the OSCE, the government concluded a bilateral accord with the opposition parties which, supposedly, allowed the latter limited access to the official media. The terms of this agreement, as the opposition pointed out at the time, was clearly weighted in the government's favour - the 'slots' allotted to the opposition were small and subject to restrictions – e.g. opposition material could not be broadcast 'live' but must be pre-recorded. However, even these small concessions have not been implemented, the opposition say. Moreover, the expert group said, the official media have now launched a campaign to 'discredit the political opposition and democratic ideas' in Belarus.

A BELARUSIAN TV PROGRAMME invited Yuri Khaschavatski to take part in a panel discussion on the Belarusian cinema today. Khaschevatski is well-known for his 'black' sat-

Latest 'Chernobyl' data

More than 6,900 inhabitants of Belarus, including 882 children and juveniles have been diagnosed with thyroid cancer since the explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986.

Commenting on these figures, Yauhien Dziamidchyk, head of the Thyroid Tumour Centre in Minsk, observed that before the accident only a few cases of thyroid cancer had been recorded in Belarus. The incidence of new cases had peaked in the period 1990-95, he said.

Thyroid cancer is caused specifically by radioactive iodine. This has a short 'half-life' (14 days); hence the radioactivity decays rapidly. However, once the thyroid has received a high dose of radioactivity, the damage is done, and a tumour may develop years later. Children are particularly vulnerable to radioactive iodine. According to Dzamidchyk, 34,000 infants and children under six years of age were exposed to fall-out in April-May 1986, and therefore live under the threat of developing thyroid cancer.

The infants and toddlers of 1986 are now teenagers or young adults. But for many, Chernobyl may have spelt the end to their hopes of raising a healthy family of their own. For, reports Uladzislaw Astapienka, Director of the Institute of Radiation Medicine and Endocrinology, many of these young people have developed problems with the reproductive system.

As the 'under-sixes' of 1986 grow up, the girls from the contaminated areas are five times more likely to develop gynaecological problems than those from the 'clean' zones. Their brothers are a little luckier - the likelihood for them is 'only' three times greater than for the boys from 'clean' areas, Astapienka said.

THE BELARUSIAN AUTHORITES are making a special effort to keep young people away from opposition rallies and demonstrations, according to the BelaPAN news-agency. According to what it termed a 'well-informed source', the Executive Commitee of Minsk *Voblasc* (Province) ordered local officials to organize after-school activities at secondary schools from 5.00 to 8.00 p.m. on 15 March, the day of the Freedom-March-II demonstration, which was scheduled to start at 6.00 pm.

Since the end of the Communist era put an end to the old structures of Party-oriented youth organizations, Belarusian officialdom has been, in the main, indifferent to the needs of young people regarding entertainment and relaxation. This is not quite the first instance, however, of the authorities providing a 'politically correct' alternative to some activity they deemed subversive. On 17 October last, the day of Freedom-March 1, admission to most cinemas and museums in Minsk was free of charge. And back in 1981, when, across the frontier in Poland, the new 'Solidarity' trade union had demanded live broadcasts of Sunday Mass, Belarusian radio was instructed to vary its usual musical diet of the dull and classical with a programme of youth-oriented pop music at the same time.

US envoy denies financing opposition

The US ambassador Belarus, Daniel Speckhard, has denied allegations from President Lukashenka that the USA is finanacing the Belarusian political opposition.

Lukashenka had claimed that the West had 'legally' given the opposition US $8 million, plus a further $108 million 'illegally'.

In a statement to the BelaPAN news agency, Mr Speckhard said that that the $8 million was earmarked for humanitarian aid programmes, support for non-governmental organizations, and student exchange programmes. 'It would be wrong to say that this money was designated for the political opposition, he said.'As for $108 million, I've never heard of that sum and have no idea where it originates from'.

New premier

Uladzimir Yarmoshin has been appointed Prime Minister of Belarus, replacing Siarhiey Linh.

Exchange rates

On 22 March, the National Bank of Belarus set the exchange rate at 423 (new) Belarusian roubles to the US dollar and 415.8 to the euro.

ire on the current regime *An Ordinary President,* a film officially banned but which has had a widespread circulation in clandestine videos. The programme was transmitted on 9 March. On the morning of 10 March, the presenter of the programme was summarily dismissed...

Women's Day

As generally in the post-Communist world, Belarus continues to celebrate International Women's Day. Among remarks relevant to the occasion, Belarusian TV quoted the following.

'Through centuries, Woman has been an inexhaustible source of inspiration for poets and artists, and a support of family and state. It goes without saying that she is still a source of inspiration and joy to any man, providing, of course, that he is normal'. (*President Alaksandr Lukashenka*)

'It wouldn't hurt young girls who finish school without having chosen their future career to form their characters in the army'. First the army, then choice of a further career'. (*A woman communications officer in the Belarusian army*).

Homiel University welcomes 'old' computers

Aberdeen College has presented 18 computers to the Francis Skaryna University (FSU) in Homiel. (Aberdeen's 'twin' city in Belarus). The computers are no longer needed by the College for teaching purposes since they are slightly out of date, and the modern language department at FSU requested them, in order to set up a language laboratory. Although not state-of-the-art by UK standards, they are, as the Aberdonians delicately worded it 'compatible with the state of information technology currently available in Belarus'.

During the Soviet period, it may be recalled, Belarus was at the leading edge of the Soviet computer industry.

BELARUSIANS FOR NENETS OIL?

The Nenets Autonomous Area in Russia's far north is hoping for cooperation with Belarus in developing its oil resources. The head of the Area's administration, Vladimir Butov visited Minsk in early March for discussions with President Lukashenka. After their meeting, he told Belarusian TV:

"A delegation from Belarus, Belarusnafta [the state oil monopoly] *visited us recently. We told them everything. And now we are waiting impatiently for you to start work in our region, because you have real professionals. Unfortunately. we don't have them yet, so we want to learn from you, learn to extract oil on our own. We don't want to listen to what some people say - that we will not be able to do it ourselves. We still want to trry it ourselves. And we want to try with the Belarusian oil company and with your direct support."*

The interviewer did not raise the obvious question: Why cannot the Nenets Area learn from Russia's own 'real professionals'? In fact, the Russian oil industries inherited from the Soviet Union various prospectors' reports and projects for the exploitation of the oil resources of the area. It also inherited a strong protest movement from the indigenous Nenets people, focusing on the irreversible damage that the oil industry would do to their fragile tundra ecology. Even the passage of heavy trucks and machinery across their terrain, they protested, would be a major environmental hazard. Their campaign, voiced in the *'glasnost'* era of the late 1980s was heeded and noted by environmentalists abroad. Furthermore, during the past few years, the old Soviet concept of 'conquering the Far North' has been replaced by cuts in government spending for the arctic and subarctic, while growing doubts have been expressed by economists as to the viability of 'developing' the area. Industries sited in the north for Soviet propaganda reasons have been closed, their work-forces evacuated (if lucky) or else left to shift for themselves.

Is the 'cooperation' with Belarus which Butov urges simply a last resort? Is Belarusnafta being asked to go where the Russian oilmen refuse to tread? Will Belarus be left to bear the near-bottomless costs of working in a remote and hostile environment, and to face environmental protests from the Nenets that would almost certainly be picked up and echoed world-wide? And - most important - did Lukashenka, enamoured as he is of cooperation with Russia, even think to ask these questions?

HRAMADA TO BOYCOTT ELECTIONS

The Central Committee of the (opposition) Belarusian Social-Democratic Party (Narodnaya Hramada) has decided that the party will not contest the parliamentary elections scheduled for next autumn, if these are conducted under the existing legislation. The reform of the electoral law is one of the major issues which the opposition insists must be an integral part of any meaningful 'dialogue' with the authorities. (see page 1).

Drug addiction soars...

The number of drug addicts in Belarus has increased 37-fold in the past 15 years, according to Uladzimir Maksimchuk, chief narcology expert at the Belarusian Ministry of Health. More than 5000 people are now registered as drug-users, however, the real number is estimated to be around 80,000 he said. (The population of Belarus is 10,200,000) In the past, some 80 % of addicts used opium derivatives, which are easily extracted from the straw of poppies grown officially for their seed (which has non-narcotic culinary uses). Now, Maksimchuk told a Minsk news conference, addiction to heroin, cocaine and synthetic drugs is becoming more and more common. Most drug addicts are men under thirty years of age, while women account for 15.1% of the known addicts. The current upward trend in the number of addicts is 'likely to continue' Maksimchuk predicted.

Statement from the Working Group of the Assembly of Democratic Non-Govermental Organizations (NGOs) of Belarus (distributed via the press-centre of the Charter-97 movement.

ONE SHOULD NOT CHANGE REAL NEGOTIATIONS FOR A PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN

The authorities of Belarus, who have done their best to annihilate basic human rights and freedoms, all of a sudden have started speaking of a somewhat 'wide dialogue' with the involvement of public organizations.

Our Assembly is the largest coalition of non-governmental organizations and we are aware of the true situation in the public sector in both the capital and provinces. Hundreds of organizations have failed to pass a repressive, politically motivated re-registration. Hundreds get similarly harassed by all kinds of false checks, pressure from the security services, and are not allowed to obtain an official permit, get a legal address, or legitimize their local affiliates. The ones which face no problems at all are the regime-run companies and pseudo-public NGOs.

Lukashenka's regime bears full responsibility for the failure to open bilateral OSCE-mediated talks between the government and political opposition on the peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy... At present, the regime tries to substitute negotiations by a doubtful dialogue, with an unlimited number of NGO partipants, without sides, procedures or daily agenda. However, public NGPs are not political institutions and there can be no unity between independent and pro-government organizations in this respect.

The Working Group considers that it is only through political negotiations that the country may find a civilized way out of the impasse caused by the Lukashenka regime; the precondition for them should be the cessation of political expression and respect for freedom of speech; their goal - the resumption of the princo[le of the separation of powers and the passage of agreements on the electoral law'.